

New House Homeland Security ranking member Bennie Thompson promises an “open door” for discussion and crafting of port security legislation

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WASHINGTON—Those who know the House Homeland Security Committee’s new ranking Democrat, Bennie G. Thompson, say that the six-term representative from the Mississippi Delta won’t be content to sit at the sidelines, singing the Blues.

True enough, the one-time student activist, labor organizer and community leader represents Mississippi’s rural 2nd Congressional district, known as the “Birthplace of the Blues.” And, he says, “If you ride with me, you’ll hear the Blues.”

But Thompson, who has spent nearly all of his adult life in public service—including two decades as a volunteer fireman before coming to Washington in 1993—has pledged to help make the House of Representatives’ newest standing committee a full-fledged player in homeland security legislation and oversight. And, that the Democrats will have something to say in that process.

“It has been three years since September 11, and it is no longer good enough to say America’s security is a work in progress,” Thompson said in a prepared statement earlier this month following the announcement that he would replace retiring Texan Jim Turner as the senior Democrat on the committee.

“Democrats will not settle for half steps, half measures or excuses,” he declared. “Under my leadership, if we find security gaps, we will hold the administration accountable, and demand solutions.”

In an interview last Tuesday, Thompson said he looks forward to his new, expanded role in a committee that just received a significant bump up in prestige, purview, and resources.

“In this town jurisdiction is everything,” Thompson noted. “I am happy that Speaker (Illinois Republican Dennis Hastert) worked with people on his side to get a rule that gave the committee permanent jurisdiction.”

Those who know Thompson say that the new ranking member worked behind the scenes to help the committee chairman, California Republican Christopher Cox (who Thompson calls “a good person”) make the case for making the former select committee a permanent one, thus assuring it broader jurisdiction, more staff, and even the hearing rooms that other committees take for granted.

One of the areas Thompson promises will receive newly empowered committee’s attention is port security.

It helps to know that the entire Western part of Thompson’s district is bound by 280 miles of the Mississippi River, and also includes three of the 16 public ports that contribute some \$1.4 billion to the state of Mississippi’s economy—Vicksburg, Greenville and Rosedale.

DEGREES OF FREEDOM

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Thompson was returning from a speech before a chemical manufacturers trade association in Alexandria and was crossing the 14th Street bridge over the Potomac into Washington when his wife, London, called, asking “What is going on?”

“At that time, I didn’t know what she was talking about, because I wasn’t aware of what had happened in New York and the plane hadn’t hit the Pentagon,” Thompson recalled. “She told me that a plane had hit the World Trade Center and said that one was headed to Washington.”

By the time Thompson reached his Capitol Hill office, he remembered, “Everybody was in a frenzy, but no one was saying to evacuate the building.” After the second plane hit in Manhattan and a loud report could be heard as the third plane hit the Pentagon, Thompson and others were told: “Get out of the building.”

“It shows you how ill prepared we were, they didn’t tell us where to go—just to get out of the building,” Thompson said. “We stood around; after a while people collected their thoughts and kind of moved us further away. At that time, another plane was in-bound. Eventually it went down in Pennsylvania. ...”

Thompson said he is mindful of how much the country has changed since then, not just in terms of increased security, but also the price that has been paid to feel more secure. “Probably in our lifetime we will never have that degree of freedom that we enjoyed (before 9/11,” Thompson remarked. “My daughter was 12 when I came (to Washington) and she came back a couple of years ago, and she couldn’t believe it. She said, ‘It’s not the same place.’”

And if his daughter, now a third-grade school teacher in Jackson, Miss., and pregnant with his second grandchild, came back today, Thompson added, just three days before the inauguration, “she’d say that it’s not the same place it was two years ago. There’s an additional layer of security.”

THOMPSON “TELLS YOU WHAT IS ON HIS MIND”

Those who know him best say that neither Thompson’s warnings that, under his leadership, homeland security committee Democrats will not ignore “half steps, half measures or excuses,” nor his pledges to work on a bipartisan basis if given the opportunity, should be taken lightly.

A dependable workhorse on social issues usually associated with the Democratic Party agenda, Thompson has been unafraid to take on colleagues from his own side of the aisle on matters he views as questions of principle.

For example, two years ago, Thompson and fellow homeland security committee Democrat, Linda Sanchez (Calif.), teamed up to complain to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) about the lack responsiveness and make-up of committee staff under Turner.

Within 24 hours of their complaints being heard, Turner's staff director was fired.

"Thompson's appointment as the Democrats' point man on homeland-security issues ensures that a centrist African-American from a rural district will be an integral part of Pelosi's leadership team," reported *The Hill* newspaper last November.

"The Homeland Security Committee, if given permanent status, could play a much larger role in the coming Congress," *The Hill* added. "It also gives Thompson an opportunity to hire a more diverse staff, correcting what he saw as the lack of minority hiring during Turner's tenure."

Thompson, says his friend of 30 years, Sheriff Frank Davis of Claiborne County, Mississippi, "doesn't talk two ways, what comes out of his mouth is what he means ... Bennie is a straightforward, honest person who tells you what is on his mind.

"You may not like all the time what comes out," Davis added, "but you never mistake where he stands or what he believes in."

ON THE AGENDA

Thompson said in an interview that by mid-week this week, the homeland security committee's membership should be established, to include between 31 and 35 members. Other organizational changes, such as increases in staffing for both Republicans and Democrats, are likely to be announced by the first week of February, he added.

The additional staff, he said, would allow the committee "to look at a broader range of things."

Thompson, who committee insiders say has a good relationship with Cox, says that for him, "the importance of homeland security makes it really a bipartisan issue. So I see the committee, long-term, pretty much agreeing on an approach to what we do."

In the immediate term, he said, he and Cox "have pretty much agreed" on holding a retreat for the entire committee--Republicans and Democrats—for a "couple of days." "As soon as we can get a complement of members," Thompson said, "we will make it happen."

Now that he is the committee's ranking member, Thompson said, "I worry whether we can really make this country as secure as the public wants us to—that's a challenge.

"I don't think we'll ever have the resources to make us terrorist proof," he added. "So we have to do the best job we can on the preventative side. But also we have to be able to respond to an event when it happens."

Thompson said that he believed that it was also important to look at the "additional benefits" ports bring to the economy beyond what is brought through the supply chain, such as the role they play in the cruise lines industry, and in the deployment of military manpower and materiel overseas.

Asked by a reporter if he thought that the frequency with which port security issues were

discussed during the 2004 campaign resulted in a qualitative leap forward for them in Congress, Thompson responded: “Yes, I think it did. And I think you will see more of that now that jurisdiction is vested where it ought to be, if we can get a lot of the different agencies that work in port security working with us and communicating—that’s one aspect of it.”

Did that mean that, during the Bush Administration’s second term, there would be more of a chance to get the kind of funding for port security experts say is essential?

“Yes, now that you’ve got an authorizing committee that can work with the appropriators along with the President’s people, I think we can get it done,” Thompson said.

“I look forward to that dialogue with industry to try to get a reasonable amount of money to support it,” he added. “But I don’t want us to, in the pursuit of what we think is perfection, overreach to make what we do unnecessarily burdensome and doesn’t get us what we are looking for—and that’s port security.”

One example of the need to make sure that efforts to protect ports did not end up hurting the very industries they were meant to secure was that of the cruise lines, he said.

“I don’t want us to be so restrictive that we potentially harm the cruise line industry,” he said. “If you continue to say how dangerous things are, people won’t travel, and if people don’t travel ... you ought to give them the comfort that if they travel they will be safe within some standard.”

As ranking member, Thompson said, port security stakeholders “will see someone who will gladly invite them to come and talk to me. I want to secure every aspect of our homeland—ports included. But I think we can do it better by involving the people with whom we are trying to work. So I think that you will see ... an open-door policy for discussion, as well as helping to fashion legislation that makes sense.

Thompson said that, “from my vantage point,” National Security Presidential Directive 41/Homeland Security Presidential Directive 13 on maritime security issued by President Bush last month, was a “coordinating document, that’s all it is.”

“It’s a start,” he added.

Thompson also said he was concerned that background security checks on port personnel remain limited to relevant issues.

“People have talked about going back five years, and if something popped up, you might lose your job,” he noted. “I just don’t think that we ought to do that; there has to be a better way. A guy who has a fight in a bar, because he had one too many, is not my idea of a security risk. ...”

THE BACK STORY

Thompson was born in 1948 in Bolton, Miss., the small rural community where he grew up and learned to fish and to hunt quail, duck, rabbit, and wild hog. “He’s an excellent marksman,” says

one long-time friend.

“I am as much a country boy as you can ever hope to meet,” Thompson said. “I hunt, fish, I speak to my neighbors, I’ve belonged to one church all my life—Ashbury United Methodist—and I know everybody who lives in my town.”

When he was growing up, Thompson said, his heroes were local, too, although a couple of them achieved national, and even international, transcendence. Thompson met the legendary Medgar Evers, the NAACP’s first Mississippi field secretary, before Evers was murdered by white supremacists on June 12, 1963.

Another big influence, Thompson recalled, was the late Fanny Lou Hamer, a sharecropper’s daughter and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field organizer.

Hamer’s challenge at the head of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the seating of the all-white regular party delegation at the Democrats’ 1964 national convention in Atlantic City, N.J., brought recognition by the party’s establishment of an increasingly empowered civil rights movement, and served as a precursor to the 1965 Voting Rights Act and other Great Society legislation.

“I was just sick and tired of being sick and tired,” Hamer said in an emotional speech broadcast on national television that was watched by, among others, President Lyndon B. Johnson. “And if it don’t do me any good, I do know the young people it will do good.”

One of those young people was Thompson, who as a college student that year helped out on Hamer’s seemingly quixotic campaign for Congress.

“It was the first political campaign that I worked on,” he recalled. “In her lifetime, I have worked with her on all her other projects. She and her husband are buried in my district, in Louisville. We named the post office there for Mrs. Hamer.”

Hamer “served as a real inspiration for a young guy early on, to stay in Mississippi, become more involved,” Thompson said, “and I have never regretted it.”

Other important influences as he was growing up, Thompson added, were Walter Benson, his Sunday school superintendent, and Louis Lee, the director of his high-school band. “My father died when I was in the 10th grade and Louis Lee, a wonderful guy, still living, kind of stepped in and served as one of those father figures for me.”

Thompson’s time in the band also nurtured a life-long love of music. He recalled choosing to play the alto clarinet “because it was the newest instrument in the band (laughs), everything else was used.”

“I love music,” he declared, “I love Blues music. The Blues basically started with my district—most of the famous Blues singers come from Mississippi. If you ride with me, you’ll hear the

Blues. It's the reality of my district."

Thompson received a bachelor of arts degree in political science from Tougaloo College in 1968, the same year he won an alderman's seat in Bolton, and went on to win the mayoralty in 1973. He also earned a master of science degree from Jackson State University, and completed extensive coursework for a doctorate in public administration at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Thompson won his House seat in 1993 after President Clinton named the incumbent congressman, Mike Espy, as secretary of agriculture.

"Bennie is a very conscientious, even-handed, loyal individual," said Robert McGlotten, a principal at the Washington, D.C. lobbying firm of McGlotten and Jarvis and a longtime friend. "There is no flashiness about him. He is very tough, he can be very tough because of principle. He's worked very hard on the issues that are important to his constituency and to the district."

In addition to hunting and fishing, Thompson remains active in community affairs in his district. Friends say that, in his free time, the congressman is also a fearsome card player. "He plays a mean game of cards—Wisk," said McGlotten. "It requires a great deal of skill and he is very skilled."

In an interview Thompson said that every weekend he commutes back to the district to "honeymoon" with London, his wife of 36 years who he met while in college, and who has remained in Bolton throughout his Congressional career. "I spend an awful lot of time in airports," he joked.

Bolton, Thompson said, "that little small town, to me, (is) my little heaven on earth, because when I can retreat from Washington, there is no place like home.

"No question. ... Washington is good to come and help set public policy, but when you want to get a life, you go home."

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